

THE ITALIAN LITERATURE OF IMMIGRATION AS A CULTURAL CROSSROAD THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REALIA AND ONOMASTIC ELEMENTS IN THE

Summary

The term “literature of immigration” refers to “sub-genre” developed in Italy in the last two decades by authors of migrant origin who chose to write in Italian, contemporaneously a foreign language for them and the language of their “host” country. The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of this literature in intercultural context through examination of culture-specific elements such as realia and onomastics in three famous novels of the popular authors Laila Wadia and Amara Lakhous. The first part of the paper provides a brief introduction to the literature of immigration in Italy: its history, the most representative authors and its place within Italian contemporary literature today. The other part of the paper concentrates on the results of textual analysis of the abovementioned works, which identifies and classifies the culture-specific elements in the texts and explain their intercultural function. For instance, there are number of cases where the influence of the new cultural context that the characters need to face is symbolically represented through a change of its name during the narration. Furthermore, the texts abound with references from the Italian and “the other” culture, such as song, book and film titles, names of authors, actors and other important figures. In particular cases the writers manage to join two references in a new “original” one which is symbolical reflection of the coexistence of the two cultural identities.

Key words: Italian literature, literature of immigration, intercultural function, realia,

ITALIJANSKA IMIGRAZIONA KNJIŽEVNOST KAO KULTURNA RASKRSNICA ZNAČAJ REALIJE I ONOMASTIČKIH ELEMENATA U NARACIJI

Pojam „imigraciona književnost“ odnosi se na „pod-žanr“ koji se razvio u Italiji u poslednje dve decenije od strane autora koji su migrantskog porekla, a koji su odlucili da pišu na italijanskom jeziku koji je za njih strani jezik, ali je to jezik zemje „domaćina“. Cilj ovog rada je da istakne značaj ove književnosti u interkulturnom kontekstu preko pregleda specifičnih kulturnih elemenata, kao što su realije i onomastika u tri poznata romana Lejle Wadije i Amare Lakhous. U prvom delu rada nalazi se kratki uvod u imigrantsku književnost u Italiji: njena istorija, najpoznatiji autori, kao i njeno mesto u savremenoj italijanskoj književnosti. Drugi deo rada bavi se rezultatima tekstualne analize gore pomenutih radova, kojom se identifikuju i klasifikuju kulturni elementi u tekstovima i objašnjava njihova interkulturalna funkcija. Naprimera, postoji određen broj slučajeva gde je uticaj novog kulturnog konteksta, a sa kojima se susreću junaci ovih dela, simbolično predstavljen kroz promenu imena u toku naracije. Pored toga, tekstovi obiluju podacima iz italijanske i „drugih“ kultura, kao što su pesme, knjige i filmski naslovi, imena autora, glumaca i drugih važnih ličnosti. U ovim datim slučajevima autori su uspeli da spoje dve karakteristike u jednu „originalnu“ novu koja simbolički reflektuje koegzistenciju dva kulturna identiteta.

Ključne reči: Italijanska književnost, književnost imigracije, interkulturalna funkcija, realije, onomastika

Introduction¹

The intention of this work is to contribute to the demarginalization of an important phenomenon in the literature nowadays – the so-called “literature of immigration”. The usage of this term is in a relative manner, because its object is an ongoing process, which first appearances in Italy date just a few decades ago and is still approached with reserve. In broader sense, the writings we take into consideration are part of the so-called “Migrant writing” or “letteratura di migrazione” in Italian, term that a good part of the researchers use when they refer to “literature produced by authors that write in a national language different of the one of their provenience, practicing even auto-translation in both directions”.²

This case of “migrant writing” in English and French is accepted long ago and already considered as part of the literary patrimony in these languages. It is linked with the colonial history, mostly representing the voice of the oppressed.³ However, in Italy we face a particular situation, and this particularity comes exactly from the lack of colonial experience. That’s why it should be observed in specific perspective. One of the most ardent researchers of the literature of migration in Italy, Prof. Armando Gnisci quoted above, finds this work as one of the testimonies of the “big migration of the people from the South-East to the North –West, at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st”⁴ seen from a global perspective. What makes Italy unique again, in these terms is its specific position on this geographical and cultural map of migration. As Gnisci says- it’s the “South of North”.⁵

Origins of the Italian literature of migration

As the literature is the mirror of the society also in this case it comes out as a reflection of a howl, as a voice of million faces we see at the stations and the corners of the touristic cities in Italy. It comes as an accusation, and as a testimony, and as a satisfaction of the need to tell the own story. This time, the voices began to be heard, almost immediately after the tragic event of the murder of the south-African worker Jerry Essan Masslo by criminal groups in august 1989 in Villa Literno in the region of Campania. The event gave rise to one of the first anti-racist Manifestation in Italy and it led the Italian government to make official changes regarding its immigration policy. The story of the event found its place in one of the first migrant narrations in Italy – the short story “Villa Literno” from the French – Moroccan writer Thar Ben Jeloun in 1991. Just a year before this publication, three important publications come out in the Italian book stores: the Moroccan-born writer Mohamed Bouchan publishes *Chiamatemi Ali* (Call me Ali) from 1990, the Tunisian-born Salah Methnani - *Immigrato* (Immigrated) in 1990, the Senegalese-born Pap Kouma- *Io, venditore di elefanti* (I Was an Elephant Salesman), the same year, 1990. In 1992 Armando Gnisci writes the essay “Il rovescio del gioco” (The reverse of the game) examining two works from this period: the abovementioned *Immigrato* from Methnani and the collected short stories *Dove lo Stato non c'è* (Where the state is not present) from Ben Jeloun. After this experience, there is a blossom of this testimonial which doesn’t recognize any national border. It means that Italian language becomes a choice of the

1 The translation from Italian into English of titles and quotes has been done by the author.

2 Armando Gnisci, *Creolizzare l'Europa. Letteratura e Migrazione* (Roma:Meltemi, 2003), 8.

3 Francesco Argento, “La letteratura della migrazione in Italia”, *Atti del Primo Convegno Nazionale Culture della migrazione e scrittori migranti*, <http://digilander.libero.it/vocidalsilenzio/laletteraturadellamigrazioneargento.htm>

4 Gnisci, *Creolizzare l'Europa*, 8.

5 Ibid., 31.

immigrants of all the parts of the world, living in Italy. A significant data base of the Immigrant writers in Italy, BASILI, established in 1997 by Prof. Gnisci and edited by Dr. Francesca Sinopoli, has identified 481 immigrant writers in their catalogue, according to the last consultation on 27th of September 2012⁶. Leaps to our attention is that almost equal numbers of the male and female writers (270 female and 211 male) representing 93 nationalities⁷, so that lead to some studies consider “A female literature of migration” as a unique component of this vast production.⁸ Gnisci and its collaborators remind that except the first couple of publications that were published in giant Italian publishing houses as an attempt to promote a kind of “exotic” writing, all the other publications are fruit of the efforts of the non-profit sectors, smaller publishing houses interested in the “intercultural” subjects and group of enthusiasts academics and no passionate to this subject⁹. The official Italian literature, inseparable from the tradition, still hasn’t accepted openly these productions under its own “umbrella”, so as Gnisci says it has to go its way by its own, without official support¹⁰.

Those who had contact with this works recognize and even admire their particularity, especially in the terms of unique meeting of cultures. More than a dialogue between the immigration and Italian, it is a meeting of cultures under the shelter of Italian language, where as some critics confess, the Italians can learn most about themselves. And in this case the literature is not only a mirror of the society, but a mirror of cultures, a means to look at ourselves and at the other closely, and understanding that we are the “others” for “them”, as well.

Meeting of cultures through the language

We choose three of the quite recent and successful novels: two of them written by the Algerian writer Amara Lakhous: *Divorzio all’Islamica a viale Marconi* (Divorce Islamic Style) from the 2010¹¹ and *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio*¹² (Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio) from 2006 and *Amiche per la pelle* (Sisters under the skin) published in 2007¹³ by Indian female writer Laila Wadia. Unexpectedly, these texts by themselves inspired reflection about which the points are and the linguistic elements where this encounter of cultures or maybe even collision happens. Are there points where Italian as a binding language is not enough for the needs of the expression? And how the author face this, how he or she manages to surmount this obstacle and making this extraordinary effort do they maybe affect and enrich the Italian and its literature unconsciously?

The area where the creativity of the author and the cultural difference has the major influence on the text is *realia*. The term *realia*, mainly used in the disciplines of translation indicates words and expressions referred to culture-specific material matters. As these texts present a case of “auto-translation”, as stated before, they abound with such linguistic elements: names

6 “BASILI – Banca Dati degli Scrittori Immigrati in Lingua Italiana”, accessed September 27th, 2012, <http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/basili2001/Bollettino%20di%20sintesi%20Basili%20biennio%202010-2011.pdf>

7 Ibid.

8 Daniele Comberiati, “La letteratura femminile della migrazione: Le scrittrici delle ex colonie italiane di seconda generazione”, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/55173444/Letteratura-Femminile-Della-Migrazione>,

9 Gnisci, *Creolizzare l’Europa*, 93.

10 Ibid. 89-94. (emphasis mine).

11 Amara Lakhous, *Divorzio all’islamica a viale Marconi*, (Roma:E/O, 2010)

12 Amara Lakhous, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio*, (Roma:E/O, 2006)

13 Laila Wadia, *Amiche per la pelle*, (Roma:E/O, 2007)

of books, films food, idiomatic expressions, customs, and many other cultural references. They can be divided in categories according to the type and the approach that the author applied.

1. Words belonging to Arabic language

In the works of Amara Lakhous there are Arabic words, usually related to Islam. Generally, they are marked in italic, transcribed with Latin characters and accompanied by explanation in Italian.

For example, when the author quotes an Egyptian proverb, first she transcribes it with Latin characters than paraphrases the proverb:

1.1 “In Egitto si dice: ‘*Al maktub aggabin, lazemtchufu l’ain!*,’ ciò che è scritto sulla fronte degli occhi gli occhi lo devono vedere per forza!”¹⁴ (In Egypt we say: ‘*Al maktub aggabin, lazemtchufu l’ain!*,’ what is written on the forehead, the eyes have to see it).

1.2 “Nessuno può sfuggire al *maktub*, il destino.”¹⁵ (No one can escape the *maktub*, the destiny.)

1.3 “Akram è un tipo vanitoso. Ad esempio gli piace molto essere chiamato *hugg*, il pellegrino. È un appellativo prestigioso che si dà a chi compie il pellegrinaggio alla Mecca oppure a un vecchio in segno di deferenza.”¹⁶ (Akram is very cocky, for example he likes to be called *hugg*, the pilgrim. It’s a prestigious epithet, given to those who complete the pilgrimage to Mecca or as a sign of respect to an old man).

1.4 “...dopo aver sborsato un po’ di quattrini per la *shebka* della fidanzata. Questa parola si riferisce riferisce ai gioielli che si danno alla fidanzata, però assomiglia a *shabaka*, un’altra parola che significa rete, come quella del pescatore”.¹⁷ (...after spending some money on the *shebka*, word that means the jewelry for the bride, but looks like another word *shabaka* that means net, like the one of the fisherman.)

1.5 “Di solito mi chiama ‘madamè in Egitto si usa per rivolgersi a una donna con rispetto. È una delle parole rimaste nella parlata egiziana.”¹⁸ (Usually he calls me ‘madam’. In Egypt we use it to refer to a woman with respect. It’s one of the French words remained in the Egyptian spoken language.)

1.6 “La *salat*, la preghiera, è una sorta di appuntamento con Dio, è molto importante arrivare puntuale, un’aprova di rispetto.”¹⁹ (The Salat, the prayer is a kind of meeting with God, It is very important to arrive on time, it’s a proof of respect.)

1.7 “Sei una *kafira*, una miscredente!”²⁰ (You are *kafira*, an infidel!)

2. Words belonging to other languages

14 Lakhous, *Divorzio all’islamica*, 29

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 56-57.

17 Ibid., 37

18 Ibid., 57.

19 Ibid., 67.

20 Ibid., 108.

In all the three novels there are characters representing immigrants from various parts of the world living in Italy. In the dialogues these characters use simple Italian sentences including some words of their native language. In that manner, the authors tend to illustrate more realistically the encounter of the immigrants with the host country. The examples below show two Bosnian characters in Wadia's novel using its native language. The unfamiliar words are marked with italics, but this time without any intervention of the author regarding the translation of these terms. It can be seen as an estrangement effect that the author tends to obtain. The words are usually part of the basic vocabulary of that language, such as "grandmother" or commonly used expressions.

2.1 "Ma non andate dietro a questa *baba* qui!"²¹ (Don't follow this *baba* "grandmother" here!)

2.2 "*Bože dragi*, proteggici da questa rompiscatole!"²² (*Bože dragi*, "dear God", save us from this pain in the neck!)

3. Words related to food

A lot of words related to food express the contact with the home and host country. They are also transliterated and marked in italics.

3.1 "Non si accorgono che la soia non lega molto con i *cevapcici* e la manioca non ha niente a che fare con il curry!"²³ (They don't realize that the soya doesn't go with *cevapcici* "grilled dish of minced meat" and the cassava doesn't have anything in common with the curry.)

3.2 "*Pasulj*, stufato piccante di fagioli, una vera delizia".²⁴ (*Pasulj*, chilly stew made of beans, really delicious.)

4. References to Italian culture

Besides the references of the home culture, the authors mention plenty of references of the culture they slowly melt with, for example: Neorealismo, Totò, Marcello Mastroianni, Dolce Vita. Even the title *Divorzio all'Italiana in Viale Marconi* (Islamic Style Divorce) which in Italian recalls a famous movie, with modification of the crucial word – Italian (Italian style), and change in Islamic (Islamic style). There are references of Italian politics through naming political parties, the newspapers and their positions.

4.1. "Che strano! Sta leggendo *il Manifesto*! È diventato comunista? Perché ha rinunciato alla *Padania*, al *Liberio* e al *Giornale*?"²⁵ (It's strange! He reads *Il Manifesto*! He became a communist? Why did he give up *Padania*, *Liberio* and *Giornale*?)

4.2. "Non sapete chi è Roberto Bossosso? È il leader del partito Forza Nord che considera nemici gli immigrati musulmani!" (You don't know who is Roberto Bossosso? He's the leader of the party Forza Nord that considers the Muslim immigrant enemies!)²⁶

21 Wadia, *Amiche*, 89

22 Ibid., 52.

23 Ibid., 79.

24 Ibid., 120.

25 Lakhous, *Divorzio all'islamica*, 101. [The titles refer to Italian newspapers.]

26 Lakhous, *Scontro di civiltà*, 15.

4.3 “Gentile, lo so, è una parola italiana che significa garbato ed educato, però in realtà è il cognome del ex-giocatore della Juventus e della nazionale italiana vincitrice dei mondiali 1982 in Spagna ...)”²⁷ (Gentile, I know, is an Italian word which means educated and polite, but in fact it’s the surname of the ex-player of Juventus and the winning representation on the World cup in the 1982 in Spain ...)

4.4 “Sei la nuova Anna Magnani!”²⁸ (You are the new Anna Magnani!)

4.5 “Che senso ha prendere lezioni d’italiano?...Sforzarvi di leggere *I promessi sposi* e andare al cinema a vedere *Il postino*. Se rifiutate le basi di una cultura, la cucina, cioè se non riuscite a mandare giù nemmeno un boccone di *jota*, come intendete digerire la vita di questo paese?”²⁹ (What sense does it have to take Italian lessons... Striving yourself to read *I promessi sposi* or going to the cinema to see *Il postino*? If you refuse the bases of one’s culture, its food, i.e. if you don’t manage to swallow neither one bite of *jota*, how do you mean to digest this country?)

4.6 “ ‘Come ti chiami?’

‘Kamla’

‘Camilla. Bene. Almeno non hai un nome da negra. Conosci Ungaretti?’

‘Sì.’

‘Veramente? Be’ cosa conosci di Ungaretti? Sentiamo’.

‘Via Ungaretti 25.’

‘Ungaretti? È una persona? Pensavo che fosse un posto, come Gerneti.’

È un poeta italiano”³⁰

(What’s your name? Kamla. Camilla. Good. At least you don’t have a name of a nigger. Do you know Ungaretti? Yes. Really? Well, what do you know from Ungaretti? Ungaretti Street 25.

Ungaretti is a person? I thought is a place, like Ferneti. It’s a famous Italian poet.)

5. References to Anglo – American culture and terms known in international context

There are plenty of terms referring to Anglo-American culture, or even words that indicate objects considered known in International context. Therefore, they are common references for the both cultures that in the same time don’t belong to any of the two.

5.1 “... divoravo le riviste femminili straniere come *Femmes d’Ajourd’hui*, *Marie Claire*, *elle*, *Vanity Fair*, *vogue*, anche se scovarele era una vera impresa.”³¹ (...I consumed the foreign female magazines such as *Femmes d’Ajourd’hui*, *Marie Claire*, *Elle*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, even though it was a whole adventure finding them.)

5.2 “Bevete il caffè come il cowboy il suo whiskey!”³² (You drink coffee like the cowboy its whiskey!)

²⁷ Ibid, 83.

²⁸ Ibid, 32. [Anna Magnani is a famous Italian actress.]

²⁹ Wadia, *Amiche*, 44.

³⁰ Ibid., 24, 27.

³¹ Lakhous, *Divorzio all’islamica*, 35.

³² Lakhous, *Scontro di civiltà*, 14.

5.3 “Alla fine mi sono ispirata a James Bond, pensando di installare una piccola telecamera nascosta nell’ascensore per scoprire il colpevole.”³³ (At the end, I got inspired by James Bond, and had idea to install a small camera in the elevator to find the guilty one.)

5.4 “È inutile parlare con lei su un argomento dove non si citi un cane o Hitchcock o Agatha Christie, Colombo o Derrick, Montalbano o Poirot.”³⁴ (It’s useless to speak with her about topics that not include a dog or Hitchcock or Agatha Christie, Colombo, Montalbano or Poirot.)

5.5 “Noi siamo in guerra, una guerra contro il terrore *War on Terror*, come dicono i nostri alleati americani.”³⁵ (We are at war, a war against terror, a *War on Terror*, as our American allies say.)

6. At the end, there are a lot of words belonging to Italian dialects which function in the texts is to underline the discrimination between the Italians themselves. For example, when a character from Milan says: “Da noi si dice: ‘Peggio di un romano’.”³⁶ (We use to say: “Worse than a roman”, ‘for something very bad’)

The references quoted above show how wide the horizon of this new literature is. In the same time it serves as a bridge for learning and understanding. These authors found a way to transmit important information about their culture, where in everyday normal situations are not given chances for. They explain what they consider unfamiliar and show what they managed to learn during their experience as migrants in Italy.

The title of a website about this “migrant culture” is “Gioco degli specchi” and it means game of mirrors. Hopefully, this work managed to present this new genre as mirrors of cultures. The abovementioned books present narrations of easily readable, but very complex and profound content. Through hilarious situation, which in fact bear quite ironic and incisive message, the authors depict the new Italy, where the words “diversity” and “interculturality” aren’t used only for Benetton advertisement, but are everywhere around. As we’ve seen they are already part of the Italian language of nowadays, and there is an emergency to notice it and to appreciate it.

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33 Ibid., 34.

34 Ibid., 61. [Famous international characters, directors and titles related to thriller movies.]

35 Lakhous, *Divorzio all’islamica*, 21.

36 Lakhous, *Scontro di civiltà*, 77.

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